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ABSTRACT

Until the late 1960s, rhetoric instruction in the United States ignored forms of rhetoric used by black Americans, although black rhetoric has existed in the United States for as long as black people have lived there. A course in black rhetoric must acknowledge the persuasive intent of all rhetoric, but note at the same time that black rhetoric goes beyond persuasion, and at various times simply addresses the issue of coping or the need for inspiration. The course must also show how the style, language, cultural context, and settings led black rhetoric to develop into an interactive public speaking style in which the speaker, message, and audience become one. By introducing students to the call-response ritual, preaching forms, storytelling traditions, and the concept of "nommo" (generative power of "the word") of black Africa, the course can enable students to understand the historic sources for black rhetoric. The role of audience interaction in storytelling should be emphasized, and the importance of religious and revolutionary rhetoric should also be discussed. Students should become aware that the focus of black rhetoric is on the black people's continuous quest for freedom, equality, security, and respect. The usefulness of rhetoric for gaining legitimacy with white audiences is also important to note. (Ideas for organizing the course, suggested readings, a course syllabus, notes, and bibliography form the second part of the document.) (SKC)

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TEACHING THE BLACK RHETORIC COURSE

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Teaching The Black Rhetoric Course

Rhetoric as a discipline has been recognized, defined and practiced since the time of the ancient Greeks. The most comprehensive work on the art of speaking remains Aristotle's THE RHETORIC (Jebb, 1909). Rhetoric in that treatise is defined as "the faculty of discovering in every case the available means of persuasion" (p.5). That definition has been expanded upon variously throughout the years, but rhetoric still consists of communicating the ideas, beliefs, values, and attitudes of one person or group to another in an effort to alter the views and opinions of the hearers. It is probably one of the most important activities engaged in by people in their attempt to create and/or bring about change in the world.

Until the late 1960's, rhetoric was taught in this country (USA) virtually without regard for a significant portion of the population--that portion which was most involved with engendering change and mostly through the spoken word. That disregarded group was, of course, Black Americans.

Black rhetoric has existed in this country for as long as there have been Black people in the United States. Even before then it existed in parts of Africa in places like Ghana, Songhai, and Timbuctu. However, documentation does

not exist in the same form as those of the Greco-Roman world to prove this claim (Smith, 1972a, p. 264). Hence, in a discussion of a course on Black Rhetoric, concentration tends to be focused on the last two hundred (200) years of Black American history and culture.

Curriculum Philosophy

The purpose of this paper is to set forth a curriculum philosophy for a model course in Black Rhetoric. Such a philosophy would naturally begin with a consensus definition, a focus and purpose of Black Rhetoric, but in our research we have not been very successful in identifying either (1). On the one hand, we believe that all rhetoric has persuasive intent, but at the same time we recognize that Black Rhetoric goes beyond persuasion, and at various times or stages simply addresses the issue of coping or the need for inspiration. The course that will be modeled here will attempt to give focus to as many aspects of Black Rhetoric as feasible.

As mentioned earlier, change is an important by-product of rhetoric. Certainly when one thinks in terms of Black Rhetoric the word comes immediately to mind. The distressed and abused conditions under which Blacks have been forced to live in this country have given rise to the need to have a rhetoric that stressed change. Because change was so slow

in coming, there was also the need for a rhetoric of reconciliation, of coping, of hope, and of inspiration.

Black rhetoric depends on a unique style of language, delivery, and unaddressed grievances, coming out of a political , social and economic discomfort, for its effectiveness. The language and delivery components are necessary to capture audiences, for many Black audiences are notoriously unresponsive to small voiced, unimaginative and uncreative speakers (Williams, 1972, p. 102).

Initially, perhaps because of a lack of education and a lack of social and other psycho/social outlets, public speaking occasions took on a plethora of meanings for Black audiences. They not only had to be persuaded, but prepared, entertained, comforted, inspired, and given reason. The rhetorical situation demands that the rhetoric be innovative and novel, for unlike the traditional public speaking situation where the speaker talks without interruption to a usually passive audience, a formal Black speaking situation shows how the speaker, the message, and the audience are one (Smith, 1972b, p. 302).

The Course

In a Black Rhetoric course, an extensive explanation of the traditional African world view philosophy must be made for there is little doubt that African cultural continuities

are at the very core of Afro-American discourse (Smitherman and Daniel, 1976, pp. 29-39). Without this explanation, students will be unable to comprehend such basics as the highly significant tradition of storytelling in community life or the highly charged ritual of the call-response pattern of the Black religious and secular gathering. Understanding the importance of the spoken word is of such significance because, no matter what the communication situation, the "word" has a life-giving, generative dimension to the Black community that must be realized and exploited.

In the African tradition, the concept of NOMMO (Jahn, 1961, pp. 133-135) -generative power of "the word"- is not restricted to the spoken word in a public forum. It encompasses all the communication events and situations of the community. Just as the African community found sustaining, glorifying and life-giving power in the drum, the stories, the dance, and the rhythms; modern Afro-American communities find, variously: solace, happiness, social and political significance and inspiration in the continuities that are present in singers like Aretha Franklin and Patti LaBelle; in comedians like Richard Pryor and Moms Mabley; in dancers like Gregory Hines and the Alvin Ailey Dancers; and in preachers like the Rev. Martin Luther

King, Jr., the Rev. Jesse Jackson, and Minister Louis Farrakhan.

In early Black life in America, people sat around the campfire listening to tales of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and Sis Goose, just as in Africa they sat and listened to the griot spin tales of the creation or recreate stories of tribal conquests, births and deaths. In later years, Afro-Americans moved from the campfire to inside the church to see and hear the minister interpret biblical passages with old proverbs, stories and songs.

Students may be better able to relate to the significance of the concept of NOMMO if s/he is able to witness a traditional Black preacher in an especially "soul stirring" Sunday morning or revival service preach to a group of "sinners" on the "moaning" bench. Students may be fortunate enough to see the preacher make the most hardened sinner, get up, join the church and begin to "speak in tongues". The minister is able to accomplish this sometimes by simply using a few key words in a rhythmical way; sometimes it is necessary to facilitate the process with a few drumbeats or lines of old familiar songs that the audience tosses back and forth, but the minister (with the help of the audience) accomplishes her/his purpose through NOMMO.

A look at the traditional West African storyteller will give students an appreciation and certainly a better understanding of Black Rhetoric as they see how the griot (or storyteller) weaves his stories with song and dance, and enlivens his tales with all sorts of sound effects; changes the pitch to suit the characters and the action; and adds all kinds of popping, clicking, clapping sounds to dramatize the events of the story. The members of the audience respond like a chorus. They interpose comments at convenient intervals, add their own sound effects, and sing the songs of the tale along with the griot.

Many similarities can be drawn between the old Uncle Remus type storyteller, the traditional and even modern-day Black preacher, the comic performer, the "soul singer" and their African counterpart, the griot. Their roles in the Black American community are as essential as that of the African griot who kept the history of the entire community in his head and who told tales to entertain the children and adults and who made life more comprehensible and enjoyable. A course that includes examples of storytelling in its various forms as used by Black speakers/ performers will assist students in understanding the dynamics of audience interaction.

In a Black speaking situation, several studies (Holt, 1972, pp. 189- 204) on Black audience reaction have observed

that Black audiences are not usually moved to action simply by how intellectually cogent a speech is. Much has to do with how s/he said what s/he said; how s/he approached his/her audience; and how she aroused certain emotions in the audience; how s/he used her/his voice; how good s/he made the audience feel; how often and how well s/he related an old story her/his grandmother had once told about the "olden" days to the issue at hand. These stories are often "speeches" in themselves; and for the careful listener they can crystallize the issue under discussion as quickly and with as much accuracy as the best researched address.

An example of one of these cogent tales is of the goose that the fox threatened to kill for swimming on "his" lake (Hughes and Bontemps, 1972, p. 13). Sis Goose, with her firm belief in justice, takes her "just cause" to court.

> When dey got dere, de sheriff,
> He was a fox, and de judge, he was a fox,
> and de attorneys, dey was foxes, and all de
> jurymen, dey was foxes, too. An dey tried
> ol' Sis Goose, and dey convicted her and
> dey executed her, and dey picked her bones.

There is little need for one to attempt to make the case to a Black audience about "blind justice" since

experience has shown that a jury chosen for a Black accused of a crime is far from being one made up of his peers.

As the rhetoric of a people is characterized by their social, economic and political conditions, so it is reflective of their status and life style. Their stories reflected experiences or desires for certain experiences. Since the only acceptable pastime was entertaining children and adults through telling stories and acting them out through dance and song, the elders and/or leaders followed the lead of their African ancestry by educating and entertaining the community at the same time-since most forms of education were either taboo or difficult to come by. This form of education not only found itself in the stories and folktales of the elders, but most appropriately and most frequently and vehemently in the pulpit of Black churches.

A course on Black Rhetoric would not be complete without a full discussion of both religious and revolutionary rhetoric. Often they are considered one and the same (2). Black revolutionary rhetoric was born in the church, and many similarities exist between it and its African source. As messages were transmitted by code through the drum in Africa, they were transmitted by code language in songs and sermons in the church. The hymn, "Swing down chariot, stop and let me ride, 'cause I got a home on the other side" or "Steal away to Jesus, I ain't got

long to stay here" are examples of songs with double meanings that slaves sang and ministers preached about (Johnson and Johnson, 1972, pp. 17-22). That spirituals had the ability to be misinterpreted was one of their most enduring and endearing qualities. Had it not been for the dual nature of the lyrics, many a conspiracy that led to freedom through escape by many Blacks during slavery would have been foiled.

One of the ways slaves kept white masters and overseers ignorant of their plans was through an exercise devised in church called "tarrying for the Lord" (or waiting for Him to enter their lives). Whites outlawed the use of drums in religious ceremonies, but stopped short of banning hand clapping because they heard them invoking the name of Jesus as they clapped. Blacks consistently took the religious ideas, songs, words and movements given to them by Whites, transformed them into something that was uniquely Afro-American, and gave them immortality by their rendition (Johnson and Johnson, p. 19).

Afro-American religious music seemed far superior to its counterparts because slaves used it to articulate many of their deepest and most enduring feelings and certainties. Lawrence Levine (1977, p. 134) stated that it is in the secular songs where the record of a slaves' consciousness can be found, but it is in the spirituals which resembled in

many ways the cosmology they had brought with them from Africa and afforded them the possibility of both adapting to and transcending their situation.

It should be noted throughout the course(s) that the focus of Black rhetoric is on Black people's continuous quest for freedom, equality, security, and respect. Black Americans, from the colonial period to the present, have been confronted with rhetorical situations that demanded meaningful responses. The reality they saw in each era was usually marked by a pervasive belief, hardened by prejudice, passed on from generation to generation among Whites produced slavery in the South, and discrimination in the North during the antebellum period. It created "Black Codes" in the Post Reconstruction period and prompted second class citizenship in the twentieth century (Williamson, 1975, pp. 77-78).

When Blacks first began speaking (or getting recognition for speaking) during the abolition period, their audiences were mostly White. Charles Remond, Frederick Douglass and others were asked to speak in order for White abolitionists to prove their points: all Blacks were not stupid; and Blacks were indeed degraded by slavery. On occasion, Frederick Douglass would bare his back to show the marks left by beatings from an overseer.

It was necessary from that time on for Blacks to legitimize themselves. They used every means possible and acceptable to get their message across: storytelling, preaching, gospels, spirituals, secular music, dancing and speaking at church, political rallies, etc.

In summary, the course in Black Rhetoric is an all-encompassing history, theory, criticism and public address course. In most institutions, one is not allowed the luxury of teaching the course over two or three semesters. If, however, one is in the process of designing or reassessing a curriculum, it is suggested that at least two semesters be devoted to the Black Rhetoric course. It could be divided according to the particular focus and needs of a department's program. An example would be to concentrate only on the theory and philosophy of the traditional African World View in the first course. Discussions, examples and field trips would deal with myths, proverbs, storytelling, poetry, song, dance, etc., as it existed in Africa and how and why it survived despite time and distance. The second course could focus on a history and criticism of Afro-American Public Address, with its attending examples and "field trips". If, however, there is only one course, the outline that follows will be useful.

A Suggested Course Syllabus

The second section of this paper will outline a comprehensive course syllabus for Black Rhetoric. If the course is to be an introductory level course or one without a prerequisite, it will be necessary to spend some time discussing rhetoric in general as well as definitions and theories of Black Rhetoric (Cummings and Daniel, 1980, pp. 97-144). This will provide students with the necessary intellectual historical perspective for appreciating and understanding the similarities and differences in classical, Western and African-based (or Black) rhetoric.

Some instructors may also find it useful to have a Part I and Part II of the course outlined below. The course as outlined contains a considerable amount of information. To add enrichment to the class, students should be provided with concrete experiences. Field trips to Baptist, Pentecostal, and/or African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) churches would be beneficial; as well as assignments to observe and participate in a concert by the African Heritage Dancers, Patti LaBelle, Tina Turner, Richard Pryor and/or Marsha Warfield. A speaking occasion featuring the Rev. Jesse Jackson or Minister Louis Farrakhan would also provide an excellent participatory communication event. To show the

difference in style, audience appeal and reaction, the use of argument and emotion, etc. have the students observe, even if only televised, a speech given by President Reagan or former Presidential candidate Gary Hart and one given by Rev. Jesse Jackson, also a former Presidential candidate.

For an overall understanding of the philosophy of the traditional African World View, which is believed by most theorists and critics of Black Rhetoric to be necessary for a full appreciation and understanding, advanced students should be assigned Jahnheinz Jahn"s MUNTU and Fela Sowande"s QUEST OF AN AFRICAN WORLD VIEW. From there, discussions on Africanisms, African continuities and survivals can take place. Beginning students or those who will only take a one semester course can be provided with an overview of this philosophy with shorter pieces by Jack Daniel and Geneva Smitherman and Molefi Asante (ne Arthur L. Smith).

BLACK RHETORIC

I. Rhetorical Tradition

A. The Nature and Relevance of Rhetoric

1. Classical Rhetorical Tradition

2. Contemporary Rhetorical Tradition

B. Black Rhetoric Defined

1. THE RHETORIC OF BLACK REVOLUTION-Arthur Smith

2. "Scholarly Literature on the Black Idiom"- Melbourne Cummings and Jack Daniel

II. Traditional African World View/African Survivals

A. Philosophical Overview

1. MUNTU -Jahnheinz Jahn

2. "The Quest of an African World View" -Fela Sowande

a. "How I Got Over"- Smitherman and Daniel

b. "Markings of an African Concept of Rhetoric - Arthur L. Smith

c. "Introduction" to BLACK COMMUNICATION: DIMENSIONS OF RESEARCH AND INSTRUCTION -Jack L. Daniel

B. The Messenger: The Griot

1. As storyteller

2. As historian

3. As critic/humorist

4. As troubadour/musician

C. NOMMO - The Generating Power of "the word"

1. Myths

2. Proverbs

3. Poetry

4. Verbal Games

5. Speeches

D. Correlations of the above

III. Black Protest

A. Historical and Rhetorical Background of the Abolitionist and Anti-Slavery Speakers:

1. Themes abd Foci

2. Code Language of Hymns and Sermons

3. Selected Speakers

a. Frederick Douglass

b. Sojourner Truth

c. Frances Harper

d. Harriet Tubman

e. Henry Highland Garnett

f. Charles Remond

4. Analysis of Themes, Impact of Messages and Speakers' Philosophy and Ethos

B. Historical and Rhetorical Background of Emigrationist/Separatist Rhetoric

1. Themes and Foci

a. Separate but Equal Philosophy -Selected Speakers

1. Booker T. Washington

2. Stokeley Carmichael

3. Malcolm X

b. Analysis of Themes, Impact of Messages and Speakers' Philosophy and Ethos

2. Themes and Foci

a. Totally Equal Philosophy-Selected Speakers

1. W. E. B. DuBois

2. Martin Luther King, Jr.

3. Shirley Chisholm

4. Thurgood Marshall

5. Angela Davis

6. Jesse Jackson

b. Revolutionary Philosophy- Selected Speakers/Writers/Singers

1. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner

2. Marcus Garvey

3. Malcolm X

4. Angela Davis

5. Sonia Sanchez

6. Nikki Giovanni

7. Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti)

8. The Last Poets

c. Language of Gospel and Secular Music

d. Analysis of Themes, Impact of Messages and Speakers'/Performers'/Writers' Philosophy

IV. Comparison of Traditional Rhetoric with Black Rhetorics

V. Observations, overview, and conclusions

NOTES

1. A "Call for Syllabi" was issued through SPECTRE, the Speech Communication Association newsletter. Only three syllabi were received, though we are aware that there are other universities that have or had black rhetoric courses.

2. Witness the many revolutionary leaders who were also ministers, i.e., Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, Nat Turner, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, to name a few.

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